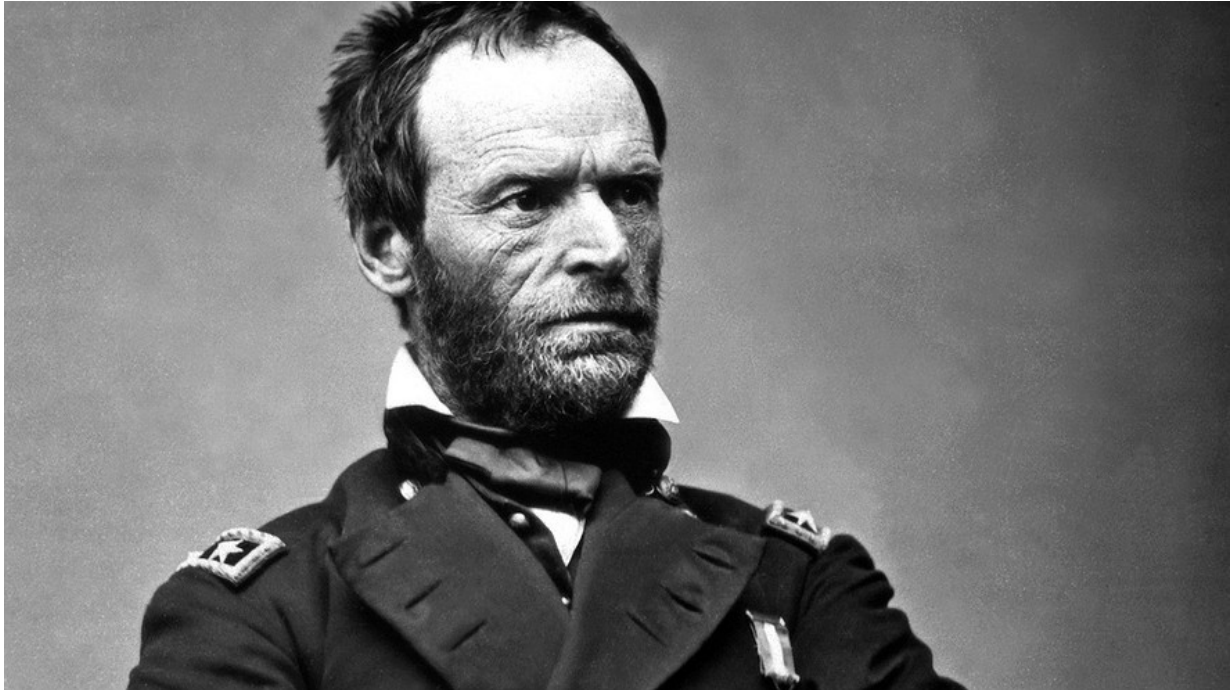


Military Leaders: William Tecumseh Sherman

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General William Tecumseh Sherman in 1865. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

Synopsis: William Tecumseh Sherman was a Union Army leader in the U.S. Civil War. He is perhaps best known for his "March to the Sea," also known as "Sherman's March," in which he led 62,000 troops along a 60-mile wide path of destruction that devastated Georgia. He was one of the inventors of the idea of modern total war, a type of warfare in which all available resources and methods are used in an attempt to subdue the enemy.

Early Life

William Tecumseh Sherman was born to a prominent family in Lancaster, Ohio, on February 8, 1820, and was one of 11 children. His father, Charles Sherman, was a successful lawyer and Ohio Supreme Court justice. When Sherman was 9 years old, his father died suddenly,

leaving the family with little money. Later, Sherman wrote that he was given the middle name Tecumseh because his father had admired the Native American Chief Tecumseh of the Shawnee tribe, who led a tribal war against the United States in 1811.

Early Military Career

In 1836, Sherman attended the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. Although he did well academically, he was frequently in trouble. Sherman graduated in 1840, sixth in his class, and joined the Army. He first saw action against the Seminole tribe in Florida.

Sherman's early military career was anything but spectacular. Unlike many other officers who saw action during the Mexican-American War, Sherman spent this time stationed in California. In 1850, he married Eleanor Boyle Ewing.

Due to his lack of combat experience, Sherman felt that the U.S. Army was a professional dead end. He resigned in 1853 and started working as a banker, staying in California during the Gold Rush. He later settled in Kansas to practice law, but without much success.

In 1859, Sherman became headmaster at a military academy in Louisiana. He was an effective administrator and was popular with the community.

At this point, the Civil War was brewing. Sherman warned his Southern friends, who wanted to secede from the Union, dividing the United States into North and South, that a war would be long and bloody, and that the North would eventually win. When Louisiana left the Union, Sherman left the school and moved to St. Louis, Missouri. Although he sided with the Southern states on the matter of slavery, he was a strong supporter of the Union.

After the war began, he joined the Union Army.

Service And The Civil War

In May 1861, Sherman was appointed colonel in the 13th U.S. Infantry. He fought in the First Battle of Bull Run, in which Union troops were badly beaten. He was then sent to Kentucky, where he became deeply depressed about the war, complaining about shortages while exaggerating the enemy's number of troops. He was eventually put on leave and considered unfit for duty. The press picked up on his troubles and described him as "insane."

In mid-December 1861, Sherman returned to service in Missouri. His first test as a commander in combat came at the Battle of Shiloh in Tennessee.

At first, Sherman ignored intelligence reports that Confederate troops were in the area and took few precautions. Then, on the morning of April 6, 1862, the Confederates struck. Working alongside Union General Ulysses S. Grant, Sherman rallied the troops and

pushed back the Rebel Army by the end of the day. He launched a counterattack the next morning, which scattered the Confederate troops. The experience bonded Sherman and Grant to a lifelong friendship.

Evolving Toward "Total War"

In February 1864, Sherman launched a military campaign to destroy the rail center at Meridian and clear Confederate troops from central Mississippi. On February 11, 1864, Sherman's Army attacked and destroyed the railroad center. Then Sherman sent his troops in four directions, destroying railroad tracks, bridges and any train equipment in their way.

In early September 1864, Confederate Lieutenant General John Bell Hood and his men were forced to evacuate Atlanta, Georgia. They destroyed as many supplies and weapons as they could before Sherman took Atlanta and burned what was left of it to the ground. With 60,000 men, Sherman began his famous "March to the Sea," tearing through Georgia with a 60-mile-wide path of total destruction. Sherman understood that to win the war and save the Union, his Army would have to break the South's will to fight. Everything was ordered to be destroyed in this military strategy, known as "total war."

When Grant became president in 1869, Sherman took over as general commander of the U.S. Army. One of his duties was to protect railroads from attack by Native Americans. Sherman believed the Native Americans got in the way of progress, and ordered total destruction of the warring tribes. Despite his harsh treatment of Native Americans, Sherman spoke out against government officials who mistreated them on the reservations.

Life After The War

In February 1884, Sherman retired from the Army. He lived in St. Louis, Missouri, before moving to New York City in 1886, where he spend his time going to the theater, painting and speaking at dinners and banquets. He refused to run for president, saying, "I will not accept if nominated, and will not serve if elected."

Sherman died on February 14, 1891, in New York City, and he was buried at Calvary Cemetery in St. Louis. President Benjamin Harrison ordered all national flags be flown at half-staff. Though hated in the South as a demon who committed terrible crimes against civilians, historians give Sherman high marks for his military strategy and tactics. He changed the nature of war and recognized it for what it was. He once said, "War is hell."